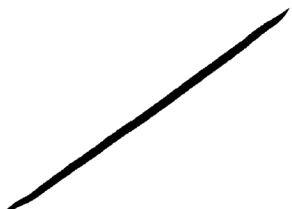


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CENSORSHIP FORMS IN ANIMATION THEATRE

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Abstract: A phenomenon encountered since ancient times, censorship has taken on different forms of manifestation in puppet and marionettes theatres, which have become animation theatres since 2008. The mutual influence of society on this kind of theatre has led to often virulent reactions and exposure to realities that have disturbed the leadership and the political system. As a result, the creators of this (traditional or professional) theatre area faced all the repercussions they generated, and assumed them, knowing the censorship, prohibitions, persecutions, amputations of the messages and even going to jail and paying with their life. Nowadays, censorship has different aspects, it is no longer exercised by the system, but it is under the direct analysis of the public, whose power has increased with the new media and under the encouragement of entertainment institutions, which want to be transparent and customer/public oriented, an attitude sometimes found at the fine line between artistic and commercial.

Keywords: animation theatre, puppets, marionettes, censorship, fairs, taboo, castelet (puppet theatre), demonstrations, parade, protest, freedom of expression.

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In contemporary animation theatre, the reference to censorship is made in the context of more and more accentuated influences, originated from two great currents that are gaining ground every day: *politically correct* and *parenting*. The repertory of these types of theatres, built largely from dramatizations of classic fairy tales and stories is another reason for discussion, starting from several problematic aspects which arise from what they present for the receiving audience, to whom they are intended: the fact that they present elements of cruelty, that they have a dichotomous character and the values and problems they expose are incompatible with the contemporary ones. On the other hand, psychoanalysts such as Bruno Bettelheim and Eric Berne (who support their speeches from the perspective of Freud and respectively Jung) defend these contents, appreciating the multiple educational valences that emerge from an interpretation starting from archetype, symbol, metaphor and cathartic approach.

Over time, the phenomenon of censorship has not bypassed this field of activity. The quintessential way of expressing this type of theatre, puppets and marionettes, represents the link between the present and the past, a living social and historical testimony. Censorship, along with propaganda and resistance, is the triad that has linked theatre to politics.

Through its symbolism, the puppet is similar to the clown: it expresses itself freely, knows no limits, allows itself the freedom to be naive, bad, funny, sentimental, outrageous, without embarrassment or even a liar... It expresses what the puppeteer doesn't want, cannot or does not dare to express directly, but, contagiously, he will transmit to the spectator the very spirit of freedom.

The subversive potential of popular performances has led to close control by political and religious authorities. In many cases, performances were banned, the puppets, sets and tools of the creators destroyed, the artists watched, imprisoned and sometimes executed, being hindered in the exercise of their profession. Even today, puppet masters are still subjected to various pressures, intimidation or brutal forms of repression.

In addition, the art of animation theatre faces the grounding of many taboos. Referring to puppets as artificial figures, they have the characteristic of representing the unrepresentable, the force of the imagination or the most intimate mysteries. As such, the puppet juggles self-censorship, giving us freedom and a different perspective upon people and their limits. In this context, the puppet has a strong revealing role for what can be said/shown or not in the public space. It can thus become an instrument for measuring the freedoms and constraints that govern society.

How has censorship manifested itself from the past to the present day? Analyzing the situations in various European countries and beyond, one can see a continuous struggle and resistance of puppet creators and artists, whose credit is the preservation of this millennial tradition.

In France, in relation to censorship, puppet theatre represented the chance to survive for the actors who performed in French fairs and whose performances were banned, in favor of the French Comedy (la-criciee.org, 2020) actors, the only ones who could hold the monopoly of dialogue in this language – “Troupe de Roi” (Vettier, 2021).

*Black doll, Masked puppet, collection
La collection de Deborah Neff, Paris/Deborah
Neff, personal archive (2018)*



In the Middle Ages, biblical episodes in churches were represented with the help of small marionnettes. The one that depicted the Holy Virgin was called “marionnette” (little Marie), hence the origin of the word, preserved until today. This kind of figurines were very popular, but the young Louis XIV banned them in 1647. Leaving the church area, they find their place in public gardens and fairs.

Around 1610, the Italian puppeteer Giovanni Briocci brought to France the character Polichinelle from the *commedia dell’arte*. Hunchbacked, with a crooked nose and chin and a shrill voice that dared to say out loud what people were whispering in fear. Parisian fairs, at the beginning of the 17th century, received puppeteers and acrobats precisely because, thanks to their freedom of movement, they easily got rid of the control and interdictions of the authorities. When fair performances were banned in 1719 at the request of French actors, comedians at fairs adapt themselves, becoming puppeteers, taking over the repertoire from the actors’ theatre and presenting short versions of successful plays. Puppets thus become a way of professional reconversion for fair actors when they close their businesses; some, being deprived of their freedom of speech, become mimes or ventriloquists. The castelet where the shows took place had a double role: it hid the actors (their identity remained secret, the puppets being animated by hand, with the help of rods, wires and without showing their faces) and they had another essential feature: they were mobile, so that they could flee, when the signal was given, taking their castelet under their arm and the puppets in their hands.

Also in France, another popular character becomes the spokesman of the exploited ones. There is the Lyonnais character called Guignol who fits this category, created by Laurent Mourguet, in 1808. Despite the support of the phenomenon by various personalities (including the writer George Sand, who organized shows for her friends, most of them being elites of that time), again, the censorship exercised by the power leaves its mark: Napoleon III’s intervention leads to the weakening of the repertoire and, implicitly, to the disappointment of the adult public in front of this type of entertainment. This is the reason why puppet shows reconsider their target and start addressing children.

Alain Recoing¹ noted an important aspect in his dialogue, “La marionette: un art de la vengeance”, for the magazine *Théâtre/public*, from December 1979:

The marionette represents a possible metaphor for man’s revenge against forces that oppress him (...) puppet theatre must become a class theatre again, which in the end has always been more or less. What’s sad is that in countries where it has regained its vocation as class theatre, it has become a conformist theatre. In France, fortunately, we can still make an theatre irritating for the powerful. (in Jurkowski, 2008, p. 206)

Coming out of this unfavorable angle of censorship, an interesting phenomenon is that the theatre, through means of expression specific to the

¹ Alain Recoing (1924-2013), French puppeteer and director



Deborah Neff / Paris
personal archive (2018)

animation theatre, tries to censor, in turn, actions with whom artists do not agree. This is Ariane Mnouchkine's case, with her "Théâtre du Soleil", which, in the tradition of social performances by the company "Bread and Puppet", takes it down into the streets, directing political processions, expressing dissatisfaction and certain demands. Thus, in 2002, she staged a demonstration against fascism (represented by Jean-Marie Le Pen), using puppets representing ten crows, symbolically suffocated with a flag. The artistic act was watched by the French from their balconies. Another impressive puppet, an allegory of Justice, was built for the events to save pensions, in September 2010.

In news reports and on the covers of magazines, the allegory of Justice imposed its fervor and strength. Slowly but surely, her appearances on the streets of Paris drifted away from her origins and left the Théâtre du Soleil to embrace the cause of an entire nation in battle. A true allegory. Not an authoritarian symbol, a living creature, strong and, at the same time, fragile, an uncertain and mobile form, which must always be kept alive, that requires those who watch to always be concerned about what they watch upon, because there are many crows that want their skin. (Tackels, 2013, p. 117)

In the **Czech Republic**, with the establishment of the state theatre, Soviet influence was felt in the choice of subjects. Being outside the network of state theatre, which had soon brought a standardization of this art (Fourmentin, 2019), Josef Skupa, the maker of puppets Spejbl and Hurvínek (father and son always in conflict) addressed through his performances to an audience of both adults and children, having great success in Europe. During World War II, Jewish artists managed to survive, struggling to cope with persecution and restrictions of all kinds. During the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia, Skupa performed satirical and allegorical puppet shows on hundreds of stages throughout Czechoslovakia and was even imprisoned.

Referring to such actions in **Spain**, Adolfo Ayuso² cites for the 2014 colloquium "Les marionnettes du general Franco", included in the work "Marionnettes et pouvoirs: censures, propagandes, résistances" (Ayuso, 2019) several decrees and notes by which General Franco, inspired by the size of the puppet theatre schools in Germany and Italy, proposes to bring back to life the old popular pranks with puppets, in which to include the great ideals of the County and the National-Unionist State. The indications were clear, the Cabinet specified the number of shows that will be staged, the number of castelets that will be purchased, the materials that will be used to make the puppets, the way of writing and the main character was designated, Juanín, the hero whose events were to take place following the traditional script in which good defeats evil (Juanín fights with ogres, witches³

2 Adolfo Ayuso, professor, author and spanish puppeteer, member of UNIMA Spain

3 Original citation: «Las obras, en prosa, necesariamente han de estar escritas por los flechas que las interpretan. El personaje central de cada obra será el flecha Juanín, cuyas aventuras y peripecias tendrán como fin el triunfo del bien, que representará en contra del mal, simbolizado en ogros, brujas, diablos, milicianos rojos y los logreros estraperlistas enemigos del Régimen. Esta Asesoría recomienda la brevedad del diálogo, la agilidad de movimientos de los muñecos, su

etc). His mottos were: «Aunque son muchos los malos, Juanín los deshace a palos»; «Cuando la razón fracasa, tiene Juanín una estaca»; «A estacazos nuestros Flechas, ponen las cosas derechas»⁴.

In Portugal, the Puppet Opera phenomenon, which had spread widely in Europe, in the fairground theatre (from which vaudeville was born, with a mixture of parodies of lyrical tragedies, Polichinelle's appearances and scenes with actors), found great support in the puppet theatre of the Bairro Alto-Lisbon (whose foundation is due to the young dramatist António José da Silva⁵, but also with the support of King John V⁶). António José da Silva, who created the specifics of the repertoire of contemporary puppet theatre, also called "The Jew", was killed at the age of 33 in Lisbon by the Inquisition, by strangulation and burning.

In Italy, the performances, which brought together characters from the Commedia dell'Arte and bambozzi, which spoke with the help of pivots, were played until late hours in St. Mark's Square in Venice. They were very successful, both among adults and children. Disrespecting the principles of ethics, criticizing the power, they immediately attracted censorship, which developed a Reform Plan, at the request of five censors (with fictitious data). Thus, a kind of crusade was instituted against the actors, accused of affecting good morals and transforming the entire city into a puppet theatre. Since then, puppet shows (expressed with the help of pivots) have remained to be played in squares, while string puppets (who sang in the bel canto style) have moved to palaces or theatres.

Leaving the European area, in **Indonesia**, in 1965, when the Sukarno regime fell, *Dalang* artists with ties to the Communist Party (had been encouraged to put their art in the service of modernization, being recruited by political parties to popularize their programs, thus obtaining numerous privileges) were sentenced to death or sent to prison. Those who escaped became cautious. After the fall of the next regime, that of Suharto, in 1998, all shows were subjected to a viewing procedure before being authorized. It was not until 1998 that the situation relaxed, but there is still a kind of political prudence and self-censorship.

Peter Schumann's **American** company, Bread and Puppet Theatre⁷ often went down to the streets, trying to send signals about social realities. Organizing a

expresión exagerada y su dinamicidad, aparte del contenido formativo del tema siempre amoldado a lo que se fija en la norma anterior. Al escribir las consignas o piezas representables, se atenderá no sólo a la perfección de la representación, sino también al optimismo infantil del tema y sentido político-social con que esté desarrollado», Note 59: Sáinz Pardo, Manuel, *Manual de Teatro de Títeres* (Manuel de théâtre de marionnettes), éd. de l'auteur, Santander (Espagne), 1956, p. 59.

4 'Even though there are many bad boys, Juanín gets rid of them with sticks.'; 'When reason fails, Juanín has a stake.'; 'With our sticks, we straightened things out.' (Note 62: Consignas escenificadas, Mots d'ordre à mettre en scène, Delegación Provincial del Frente de Juventudes, Alicante, Espagne, s.d., pp. 153-154.)

5 António José da Silva, 1705-1739

6 Jean V, king of Portugal between 1707 and 1750, he decisively protected opera music, setting up a scholarship program in Italy.

7 *Bread and Puppet Theatre* is a radical puppets company, founded by Peter and Elka Schumann, which began operations in 1963 in New York, and in 1974 moved to Glover, Vermont, USA.

parade against the Vietnam War in central New York drew violent gestures towards the puppets (stealing a puppet representing Jesus). A show with Punch and Judy, played to support the rent strike in the Lower East Side, led to the organization of a spontaneous protest (Kourilsky, 1971, pp. 195-196). However, Shumann did not want his theatre to be considered a factor of agitation and propaganda, giving people the impetus to act.

Another type of censorship, this time revealed by a symbol-element for children, the doll, was found in **Africa and South America**. Witnesses to a history laden with social problems (slavery, discrimination, civil war, exile or dispossession) black dolls, ‘topsy-turvy’ or ‘twinning’ (reversible), with two identities, symbolizing black skin and white skin, denotes conceptual polarity, differences between races and, at the same time, their mixture (acts such as rape were very common), resulting in offspring of this mixture. These dolls, very popular in the XIX century, in the southern slave states, were apparently made by African Americans. There are two theories about the motivation for making this ingenious doll. First: black children were forbidden to play with white dolls. The solution was this reversible doll, which (when the children were taken by surprise by someone) could change its chromatic appearance, the white part being covered with the skirt. The second: black children were not allowed to have black dolls on the plantation, so they turned them when necessary. These dolls, in the use of white children, symbolized the mother (the white part) and the maid (the black part). A similar category is represented by the type of **masked**, white dolls pets, covered with black masks, with an enigmatic appearance and the role of changing or hiding the identity. Their existence denotes racial polarization⁸. These social, anthropological and historical testimonies seem to come under the auspices of censorship, along with the stigmatization of the use of the word ‘black’ and the collateral implications of important literary masterpieces, considered racist.

In Romania, at the end of the XVIII century, the puppet game was initially independent, then it was attached to Vicleim⁹, whom it completed.

At the beginning of the show, the artists asked the audience how they preferred to see the puppets show – “on the street or on the porch?”, “straight forward or satirized?”, “With curtain or without it?”, meaning to put things more directly or more on the sidelines – then, the puppeteer urged the violinist “Fiddler, listen to them saying!” The scenes were satirical and licentious; situations and characters representing the authority were parodied: the corrupt policeman, the drunk pope, the unlucky hunter, the new fashion dancers, or the professional beggars. Ion Massof wrote in the work “Romanian Theatre” that:

The puppet game, as it takes place in our country, is a product of our people, an expression – when it does not slip into the trivial – of healthy humor, the need of the

8 *Black Dolls* la collection de Deborah Neff, (2018) Paris: Fage and La Maison rouge

9 *Vicleim* is a form of popular religious theatre

people to whip, sometimes facing restrictive measures of the administration, social evil. (Massof, 1974, pp. 38-39)

In the show *Vasilache and Mărioara*, as Prof. Daniel Stanciu remarked in the work *Hypostases of the traditional theatre, from rite to entertainment*, the actuality was inserted in the traditional setting; in addition to the current types such as the Gendarme, the Turc, the Muscal, the Iaurgiul and the Bragagiul, real people, well-known in the village or in the respective slum, were also shown.

Across Europe, starting in the 18th century, censorship is beginning to develop that will no longer allow allusions to contemporary people, and police and rangers will ensure that puppeteers do not break the law. The conflict of the authorities with the puppeteers reaches its apogee in the 19th century (leading in some countries to the total prohibition of the puppet theatre, a situation described in detail by Vasile Alecsandri in the theatre play *Iașii în carnaval* and in the monologue *Ion Păpușarul – Ion the Puppet Master*) (Stanciu, 2007, pp. 53-54).

Since the establishment of the professional puppet theatre in Romania, in 1949, through the directions drawn in that period, a repertoire was required to exclude the dramatization of fairy tales and stories, in favor of plays written especially for this kind of theatre, more modern and stylized. The results were not the best, so over time, these concepts were abandoned. The shows with pioneers, staged at Țăndărică Theatre, did not pass either. Director Ildikó Kovács, referring to her career as a fight with the windmills, said that she could not explain how some shows passed censorship.

*Ubu Roi*¹⁰ was played for five years during the dictatorship. Then we were praised on the radio station Europa Liberă, and at that moment, the play was immediately banned. (Szebeni, 2018, p. 94)

However, before '89, the Canadian ambassador, visiting Romania, wanted to see the show. The appearance had to be kept:

The authorities could not recognize that there was censorship, that the show was forbidden... Comrades from the party came, who had never been to the show, but now they were obliged by circumstances, security guards as they were called. At first, they clapped their hands up, then down, then not at all. (Szebeni, 2018, p. 104)

The director also faced censorship in other plays, such as *Svejk* (removed by the censor from the repertoire, before the premiere, which was always postponed), with the expression from *The Tempest*, *The Golden Age*, or that of Tennessee Williams (*The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, which appeared without the word "milk" – food that was not available at the time).

Currently, we find censorship in animation theatres, as a phenomenon of

10 *Ubu Roi*, a show staged in Cluj by the director Ildikó Kovács; premiered on October 30, 1980 and played until 1985, when it was banned.

form and substance. On the one hand, it targets disturbing lexical constructions, discriminating expressions, allusions, words that are not indicated for children to reproduce and can go as far as excluding some characters (skeletons, death, devils etc.). Equally, visual or sound constructions can be censored (the use of elements such as laser, smoke, quartz light or recorded passages, sometimes shrill or with too much music). Some people accuse the excess of elements such as new media, the most targeted being the projection, taking out of context the need for scenography and minimizing its role ("I came for theatre, not to see cartoons"). In this context, the creative director's freedom of expression is censored, although his work must express his vision of life and theatre.

Choosing the repertoire becomes a challenge in the context of an audience that has become extremely sensitive and easily disturbed. Visual differentiation, whether chromatic (white characters, black characters) or in terms of physical constitution (a thin girl and a fat girl), although extremely useful in terms of perception and visually enriching for the show, is lately considered, offensive and discriminatory. The tendency is to place the child under a glass bell and the appearance of a utopian world, in which evil does not exist, nor conflict, therefore no motivation for overcoming obstacles and evolution.

Adults being increasingly unable to distinguish between reality and fiction, find in literary fiction, which forces the reader to temporarily suspend their own distrust, a potential trigger for trauma and deviant behaviors, fearing that the story would certainly generate uncontrollable and harmful to growth fears. As if the children were learning about the existence of fear from stories and not experiencing it themselves in their own daily experience. (Zoboli in Toma, 2017)

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